

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
#358**

**DOUGLAS FRIAS, SR.
PEARL HARBOR NAVAL SHIPYARD, CIVILIAN**

**INTERVIEWED ON
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BY MIKE SLACKMAN**

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**USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL
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Mike Slackman (MS): The date is June 30, 1982. This is Mike Slackman. I'm talking with Mr. Douglas Frias, Sr. in his home at Punaluu, Hawaii. Mr. Frias was a shipyard worker, Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard worker at Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard on December 7, 1941 and worked at Pearl Harbor throughout the war and we're going to be talking about some of his experiences during those years, in the 1940s, during World War II. Mr. Frias, let me start by asking you what you were doing, what exactly you were doing when the attack on December 7 started.

Douglas Frias (DF): On the morning, December 7, we had a particular job that was under the hammerhead crane. Just at the time of the attack, I was going onboard the *Ramapo*, which is an oil tanker. I was there to assign my men to their particular job.

MS: What kind of work specifically were you doing at that time?

DF: At that time, we was, of course, steelworkers. We were shipfitters.

MS: Mm-hmm.

DF: And we put the brackets and the clips to the hull of the ship, the main deck, and that required work below decks for the simple reason that the ship had a belly full of oil. And the area between the top of the oil and the underside of the deck had to be pressured with CO₂ [carbon dioxide] to prevent explosions or fire. The shop ninety-nine man was the first man I was to contact to find out whether things were ready and to test whether we could weld to the deck of the ship. Then I assigned my men to their work and I was going back to contact the supervisor, leader man, of the woodworking group, who were put in the cribbing. And I looked up and saw these planes coming towards us.

MS: Excuse me, what was that cribbing for?

DF: The cribbing was for the PT boats, which were required in the Philippines. In fact, General MacArthur requested as many as possible to use for patrolling the Philippines.

MS: Okay. And so what happened then on the...

DF: Well, then when I saw these planes coming towards us, they were breaking through the clouds and the sun went back of them. Of course, they were coming from the east. And we couldn't readily recognize what they were. Some of the boys were excited. They said, "Mr. Frias, I believe the navy's having an exercise and dropping water bombs."

When I looked back toward Ford Island, I saw all this fire and explosions and I realized that that wasn't a water bomb. I said, "I'm afraid, fellas, that we're being attacked by an enemy."

So I looked up further and I saw the red, what we call the Japanese emblem under the wings. And I said, "Gosh, it's Japan that's attacking us!" So I said, "Fellas, let's get back on the dock."

We had all this material laid out for new construction. We get under the heavy plates and see what happens.

Well, everything happened so suddenly there, with the bombs dropping, they came in and flew right over us, came down real low and dropped their torpedo bombs toward the battleship. We could see the bombs drop and in fact, it was possible to see the pilots' faces.

After they dropped the bombs, they turned hard toward the dry docks and started strafing. Other types of planes came along horizontally, up real high, and dropped bombs. My duty then was to get to a telephone and call my supervisors, the senior supervisors and the production officer, who were

up at Oahu Country Club, playing golf. I was an avid golfer at that time and I missed out on it because we had a drawing and I lost. Consequently, it was my job to work that Sunday morning.

When we got to the shop, all the supervisors were given bicycles to ride. It was a privilege so you could get from one job to the other, to save time. On the way down, they dropped a bomb on the fantail of the ship that was just _____, *Ramapo*. The concussion of that bomb caught me and my bicycle and I went up against the building. In the excitement, I couldn't let go of the bike. I hung on to the handles and finally got to my senses, ran across the street and got to the shop. But by then, everybody had been warned, the whole city and I guess the world knew about we being attacked. And the supervisors were coming back to work. All of the employees were asked to come back to work. But there wasn't any work we could do. What really was the problem at that time is trying to get the injured and

the dead off of the ships, across the bay from the *Arizona* and the other battlewagons. Ships like the *Oglala*, and the *Helena*. We had so many men injured and actually dead that we stacked them in back of the machine shop, four or five high. It was a very pitiful sight due to the fact that some of the people were not completely dead yet. They'd shiver or move and we'd have to call the medic over. The medic was _____ on duty and they took care of the bodies as they brought them in.

Everybody was asked to use their cars to transport bodies and it was bedlam. Hardly anybody knew what was really going on. It was so _____, the number of people that were killed.

However, then we had to worry about our shop and the top of our shop is what we call the mold loft. It's a wooden deck upon which you draw your plans and lay out your templates, patterns. And it's very important phase of the work...

MS: Was that patterns the exact size that you would cut the pieces to?

DF: Yes. These are exact. We lay out the plans and make it to exact size. And then these patterns and templates—we'd call 'em templates—they're made of wood.

MS: About how big was the mold loft, would you say?

DF: The mold loft was probably about fifty feet wide and at least 100 feet long. You'd lay out a whole bulkhead of a ship with all the templates for it and send it downstairs, in the lower deck they'd lay it out on steel plates and do all the fabricating on that. Punch _____ shear and flange and put it together, weld it together, ship it out to the ship.

MS: So did you work up in the mold loft during the period when the ships were being salvaged and repaired at Pearl Harbor, right after the attack?

DF: At one time there, that was my job. I was supervisor in charge of the mold loft. We did all the template work. We had quite a few apprentice _____ working along with us. I would later on, I was transferred to the night shift and I was a senior supervisor of the night shift, which we had. At that time, I was promoted to quartermaster and we had chipping caulkers, welders...

MS: Excuse me, what's a quartermaster?

DF: The quartermaster is a rank above a leader man.

MS: Mm-hmm.

DF: And he has probably twelve leader men under him and each lead man has anything from twelve to twenty-four men. So a quartermaster has normally about 200 men under his supervision.

MS: Did you work at all on any of the, go out to the ships in the water that had been damaged?

DF: Yes. We had to go out to the ships that were damaged to pick up templates and patterns. See, we didn't have time to get all the blueprints out. And some blueprints weren't available at the design _____. We would have to go to the ship. On a small damaged area, we could go there, just make the template, bring the template in and correct the work on her rather than lay it out on the floor, thus saving a lot of time.

MS: Did you go out to the *Arizona* at all?

DF: Yes. We all went out to the *Arizona*. Quite a few of our chip and caulkers worked out on the *Arizona*, especially in trying to get the men from below decks. And salvage work wasn't ready yet. Our job then was to save the people on the decks. We had one particular gentleman, I'd like to mention his name. His name is Jules Decastro. He became a quartermaster chip and caulker. And we couldn't use any torches down there because of the gasses that were building up.

MS: Mm-hmm.

DF: It's highly inflammable, explosive. So they did chipping. And he chipped and chipped 'til both of his hands were just...

MS: With a hammer and chisel you mean?

DF: No, with a gun.

MS: A pneumatic...

DF: Pneumatic chipping gun.

MS: Oh.

DF: And _____ in fact, the survivors of, the military survivors of December 7 paid his way to Washington, D.C. and he was _____ quite a lot. I found out this later. Very interesting.

MS: On the *Arizona*, on working on the *Arizona* in the salvage operations, do you remember any of the workers being killed or injured?

DF: Yes. There were a couple of deaths as a result of explosions.

MS: Mm-hmm. Do you...

DF: They gave up, the ship was so badly damaged that there was no motive in salvaging it. But also happened to some of the other ships, the *Utah* was one of the battleships that we raised her with pontoons and whatnot and she was so badly damaged, we couldn't repair it. They _____ it for salvage and she eventually sank in the Pacific. The cable broke and she just sank right _____ Pacific. So we lost that.

MS: Which ship was that?

DF: The *Utah*. The, I forgot, was it *Utah*, the *Oklahoma*? _____ so far back, can't remember very well. The *Utah*, we rolled her over.

MS: So what other, which of the other ships did you work on?

DF: Well, we worked on the *Honolulu*, the *Oglala* and the battlewagons, the *Saratoga*, she was badly damaged. She

had torpedo damage right through her, what they call the torpedo bulkheads. You have longitudinal bulkheads which were to prevent the torpedo from going all the way into the integral parts or any of the _____ spaces. And the torpedoes hit there when she was loaded, when the concussion explosion tore all the bulkheads together. We had to put in all new transverse bulkheads as well as the longitudinal bulkhead. That was a big job.

MS: Mm-hmm.

DF: Then after these repair jobs were completed, we also worked on some British ships, carriers, *Victorious* was one of them. We did a lot of work on the re-armament of the ships.

MS: How did that go?

DF: _____ your battlewagons took all the twenty mm guns out. They were very ineffective. They put forty-millimeter guns on and a three-inch anti-aircraft gun. The battlewagons all along the, any open space, you put a gun mount down. We built many, no one knows yet how many gun mounts because they were just built like doughnuts coming out of a factory. But you had hanging mounts on the carriers, right off the flight deck and also off your main deck and these were all anti-aircraft. They were spaced probably thirty feet apart and you can imagine the plane trying to dive into a carrier with all these guns. They wouldn't have a chance to get through that. _____.

MS: When I talked to you last time, you told me a little bit about making prefabricated ballast for the destroyers.

DF: Yes, the destroyers, so many of them were damaged. In fact, it was their duty to protect the carriers and as a torpedo, for instance, enemy torpedo would be going toward a carrier,

the destroyer would cut in there and take the impact of the torpedo, blow its bow off. Fortunately, these watertight bulkheads, they had their watertight doors that automatically would secure, the ship could travel without a bow. They'd limp back into the shipyard and we'd have bows prefabricated, ready for 'em. As the ship got into dry dock and the outside fitters and gunners and welders would cut off the sections of broken bow and tear that off, the riggers would pick up another bow they had already prefabricated. Pick it up and lay it down into the dock and push it up in place, weld her up and send the destroyer off. Some of them...

MS: How long would that take?

DF: That would take, well, they're working right through, twenty-four hours a day. And probably a week, get the job done.

MS: How long would it have taken if you hadn't had that bow prefabricated?

DF: Oh gosh, probably six months, probably.

MS: So it's quite a savings in time then?

DF: Certainly. In fact, we even had a bow left over. When the war was all over, we had a bow down at the end of the shipyard. Beautiful bow, it was up there for a long time. They should've made a, some kind of a historic site for it. We did fabricate a huge bow for the cruiser, *Minneapolis*. That just about took up the whole area of the shop. We got that out further on. Other destroyers, when we didn't have any time and at other shipyards on the West Coast had more time to do work, we just put a false bow on. Just a couple pieces of plate and weld it up and send her back across the Pacific without a bow, just a flat plate on her.

_____. And that saved a lot of time. The main

problem that time was getting material out here and we had so much work on repairs that we couldn't handle all of it. Some of it had to be sent over.

There's some kind of a _____. Something like 7,000 ships were repaired in the shipyard during the war. That's Pearl Naval Shipyard. And that's quite a record.

MS: Anything else you can recall about your work at Pearl Harbor Shipyard during the war?

DF: Well, I readily say that as a result of the urgency of the work, there were quite a few innovations that have, people come up with good suggestions and they were all time-saving. And that covered all of ship. That wasn't just the workmen down on the dry docks or the worker in the shop. That also went as far as design _____ and planning.

MS: Yeah, prefabricated bows being an example of that. Can you think of any other examples?

DF: Only, well, other sections of ships, not only the bows were prefabricated. Gun mounts were all made before the ship was even near the shipyard. They were all ready to go. As soon as the ship landed, they'd pick up a gun foundation, put it in place aboard her.

Of course, Henry J. Kaiser was the lead in this type of work, this prefabricated work. I guess we learned a lot from it too.

MS: I guess the Pearl Harbor attack must have really changed life in Hawaii a lot.

DF: Yes, it had all the people worried. Quite a few people sold their homes at very nominal prices, left for the Mainland. Then when they got to the Mainland, they were afraid of attacks. They had quite a few scares on the West Coast, you

know. We were always figuring we'd be attacked again. 'Cause we didn't have anything at that time to repulse an attack. We didn't have no ships, they were all, most of our ships were damaged and _____. But I must say the good lord was with us. Being the great nation that the United States is, it came through it all right.

MS: Okay. Well, thank you very much, Mr. Frias.

END OF INTERVIEW